

A Stone-Walled Hermitage

In the autumn of 1966, a hulking young Irishman could have been observed (but luckily for him he was not) behaving very oddly in a certain gloomy district of West London. When the weather was fine, he would lie in the long grass in a particular park. Later, when the nights got rainy, he took to sitting in an ancient car outside a hospital, clutching a large bunch of chrysanthemums.

If you could have got close enough—and he would not have allowed you to—you would have seen that inside the flowers he was hiding a two-way radio. The man he was talking to was George Blake, who was then in the sixth year of the longest prison term to which anyone has ever been sentenced by an English court: forty-two years for betraying several dozen British intelligence agents to Russia's KGB.

Each night the Irishman contacted Blake, in his cell in D Block, Her Majesty's prison, Wormwood Scrubs, with a little bit of chat which went like this:

Sean Burke (for that is the Irishman's name): "Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage."

Blake: "Minds innocent and quiet take that for a hermitage."

Burke: "Richard Lovelace must have been a fool."

Blake: "Or just a dreamer."

Sean Burke and George Blake met in an English literature class in the Scrubs. (That was where they read Lovelace together.) It is hard to imagine their meeting anywhere else.

Burke was doing a seven-year stretch for sending a

THE SPRINGING OF GEORGE BLAKE. By Sean Bourke

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Reviewed by Godfrey Hodgson

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bomb through the mail to a policeman, a charge on which he claims without undue insistence or surprise that he was framed. The local police in Sussex had incurred his displeasure by heavy-handed inquiries which tipped off his neighbors that he had previous convictions. Burke, characteristically, had responded with a High Court writ. English policemen are still overquick to jump to the conclusion that muscular young Irishmen capable of such insubordination are natural bombers.

About four years later Blake, who on the most optimistic assumptions about remission of sentence had still 28 years to serve, casually asked Burke, who was to be paroled, to help him go over the wall. Burke as casually agreed.

He is lucid about his motives. He did not ask for money. He had no political sympathy for Blake as a Russian agent, though he was shocked by the ferocity of his sentence. He is not even an Anglophobe. (Few Irish Irishmen, as opposed to the Ulster or American varieties, are nowadays.) After a nightmare childhood in Irish reformatories, he claims to have found Borstal in England comparatively humane.

What he had acquired from his childhood with the fathers and their round of

flogging and prayers was a generalized hatred of authority. As his story shows, of all authority. To spring the most notorious prisoner in England appealed to him primarily because it would make the authorities satisfyingly furious.

Single-handed, after agonizing near-misses, Burke got his man over the wall on a home-made rope ladder braced with knitting-needles. With the help of three amateur Pimpernels, he smuggled him to Moscow, and a few weeks later he followed him there himself.

So far, it is a straightforward adventure story, real life Eric Ambler. But in Moscow Burke found himself in Kafka's world, at once more deadly and more subtle. Blake, he gradually came to understand, was a traitor by nature, not by circumstance. Insidiously Blake tried to shop Burke to the KGB officers who were in charge of both of them, and for whom Burke seems to have a certain guarded respect. Finally, Burke overheard Blake urging the Russians to shoot him.

It will spoil the story for you if I give away how Sean Burke got out of that situation, beyond saying that I believe his tale, and that it took both great cunning and great courage. He is back in Ireland now, and a free man unless the British authorities can succeed in extraditing him and bringing him back for trial, in which case he would risk another five years.

I hope they don't succeed, and indeed I hope they don't even try hard. I think Sean Burke has earned the freedom he has shown himself willing to take such risks for. The Irish reason: he writes so well, with such vividness and humor, that I can't wait

Happily Left Behind

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